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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

29 July 1980

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MEMORANDUM

Syria: Problems; Prospects for Succession; The Soviet Role

Summary

President Assad has cracked down even harder on his largely Sunni Muslim opponents since the nearly successful attempt on his life last month and appears in no mood to compromise. This tactic appears to be at least temporarily effective, and opposition activity in most major Syrian cities has declined in the month of July. The military and security forces, on which Assad's survival ultimately depends, remain generally loyal to his minority Alawite regime and serious splits along sectarian lines have not yet developed. Some desertions have occurred, however, and some officers have been arrested on suspicion of disloyalty.

There is no obvious successor to President Assad. His brother, Rifaat, is in a good position to seize power, but there is widespread opposition to his becoming President. Dissatisfaction with Assad's inability to quell domestic unrest is growing within the Alawite community and could lead to an

This memorandum was prepared by the Near East South Asia Division and USSR-East European Division, Office of Political Analysis at the request of the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. Information available as of 29 July 1980 was used in its preparation. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations, the Office of Economic Research, the Office of Strategic Research, the National Intelligence Officer for Near East South Asia and the National Intelligence Officer for USSR-Eastern Europe. Questions and comments should be addressed to Chief, Near East South Asia Division

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Alawite coup to preserve Alawite primacy in Syria. It would probably be swift and bloody. A Sunni military coup is less likely and would have little prospect of success, unless preceded by recurring, large-scale civil disorders and by major splits among Assad's Alawite lieutenants. The Muslim Brotherhood, although spearheading the opposition, does not have the national organization enabling it to wrest power from Assad. The Syrian Baath Party, packed with Assad loyalists and political hacks, is also not in a good position to oust Assad without strong military support. If sectarian violence continues to grow, a Lebanese-style civil war splitting the Army along confessional lines could result. The winner would be difficult to predict, but a new military regime probably would emerge. [REDACTED]

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Soviet-Syrian relations have grown noticeably closer since Sadat began his peace initiative with Israel. There are now approximately 3,000 Soviet military advisers and 1,000 civilian advisers in Syria, most helping the Syrians absorb the vast quantities of military equipment delivered since the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Moscow is clearly worried about the stability of the regime and Assad's prospects for survival, but its ability to influence the situation is limited. The Soviets [REDACTED] do not favor Assad's ouster, fearing damage to their prestige and reduction of their influence in the region. They are especially concerned by the campaign of terrorism against Soviet advisers, at least 12 of whom have been killed this year. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets hope to exploit Assad's weak domestic position and increase his political and military dependence on the USSR to obtain even closer bilateral ties. They probably still favor signing a friendship treaty to boost their image and credibility as an ally to the Arabs, provide legal justification for their demands to play a leading role in Middle East negotiations, and survive possible leadership changes in Syria. [REDACTED]

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The most important Soviet leverage stems from Moscow's arms supply relationship, but this leverage has afforded the Soviets only limited influence in Syria. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Should Assad fall, the Soviets

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25X1 would move quickly to adjust their policies, hoping that Syria's dependence on Moscow for military aid would ensure a continued Soviet role. [REDACTED]

### Assad Cracks Down

25X1 Since the nearly successful assassination attempt last month, Syrian President Assad has significantly increased the tough measures he instituted against his opponents in April. He appears committed to a program of repression to maintain his regime in power and crush his opponents. [REDACTED] 25X1  
has:



25X1 Assad is in no mood to compromise with his opponents or to back down from the unusually harsh measures he has adopted. [REDACTED] 25X1

25X1 These tactics appear to be at least temporarily effective. Although antiregime violence is continuing at a low level in Aleppo, Syria's major cities have been generally calm this month. This may be due as much to an apparent decision by the Muslim Brotherhood to suspend operations during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan as to the tough security measures. [REDACTED] 25X1

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Although the regular armed forces have generally remained loyal to the regime, the repeated use of the regular Army to repress civilian Sunnis will severely strain the cohesion of the military and increase the likelihood of significant numbers of Sunni troops deserting with their arms to join the opposition.

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While these harsh tactics may be effective in the near term, we believe that widespread use of repression will further erode Assad's power base, intensify sectarian tensions, and increase dissension in the army. Resentment against the often excessive tactics employed by the security forces is rising rapidly in the Sunni community, and some lower ranking Alawites are said to question the durability of Assad's regime. Last month's assassination attempt underscored Assad's vulnerability and will almost certainly encourage his opponents to try again.

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#### Scenarios for Succession

Assassination. Assassination poses a serious near term threat to Assad. In the event of an assassination, the Alawite community would probably pull together and either nominate a successor to Assad from among the inner circle of Alawite military and security officials or form a collegial body to rule until a successor emerged.\*

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An Alawite successor regime might try to placate the Sunni opposition by offering concessions and bringing more Sunnis into

\*Syria's constitution contains procedures for succession to the presidency in the event of the death of the incumbent. These procedures are untested and, given the political turmoil that would follow Assad's assassination, are likely to be ignored.

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[redacted]

nonsensitive posts, while maintaining Alawite control of the military and intelligence services. These moves would not pacify Sunni Muslim extremists who want an end to Alawite rule in Syria, and sectarian violence would be likely to continue. [redacted]

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Alawite Coup. There is growing disenchantment within the minority Alawite community over Assad's inability to quell the domestic unrest and increasing fear that his mishandling of the situation could lead to a Sunni-Alawite civil war in which the Alawites might be decimated. If Assad does not move to calm some of these fears, the Alawite elite may conclude that he must go in the interests of preserving Alawite hegemony. Such a coup would most likely be mounted by middle-level Alawite military officers--most of the top Alawite officers are too closely tied to Assad--and would probably be swift and almost certainly bloody. A joint Alawite-Sunni coup attempt cannot be ruled out completely, but it seems unlikely in the present mood of intense sectarian antagonism.

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[redacted]

Sunni Coup. A Sunni-led coup against the Alawites is also possible--particularly if the use of largely Sunni regular army units to control domestic unrest continues--but one with little chance of success as long as the Alawites remain united. Military units considered the least loyal are generally stationed farthest from Damascus, and their movements are monitored by the security services. [redacted]

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The Sunni community, historically a majority of the population in Syria, has never been forced to develop clandestine leadership as was the case with the Alawite minority. There are no personalities or organizations within the Sunni community with identifiable leaders who are powerful enough to assume power in the event of Assad's sudden removal. [redacted]

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Civil War. If sectarian violence continues to grow, a Lebanese-style civil war may be the eventual outcome. Alawites, remembering their subjugation under Sunni rule, unquestionably will fight to preserve their primacy. If the Alawites continue to support Assad and his massive repression of Sunni opposition, civil insurrection could spread throughout Syria's major population centers. Assad's elite units are large enough to handle several disturbances simultaneously, but increased reliance on the regular Army could result in some units turning against the Alawite regime. [ ]

If discipline in the Army collapsed while riots were widespread, a bloody civil war probably would develop between Alawite- and Sunni-controlled units. Whoever won, a new military regime-- Alawite or Sunni--probably would emerge. [ ]

#### The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood has spearheaded the opposition to Assad and has been responsible for most of the violence that has swept Syria over the past 18 months. Although it appears to be well organized on the local level and probably has significant sources of support outside Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood does not have the kind of national organization that would enable it to wrest power from Assad or take control if he were assassinated. [ ]

The Brotherhood has, however, traditionally been the leader of Sunni opposition to Alawite control, and if disenchantment with Assad among Sunnis continues to increase, it might become the rallying point for broad-based Sunni opposition. Such an effort might include support from Sunni military officers and lower levels of the Baath Party. [ ]

#### The Baath Party

The Syrian Baath Party has only limited influence in decision-making, and its upper levels are packed with Assad loyalists and political hacks. The party and its principles are important as a facade of legitimacy, and the party is the principal national organization reaching down to the village level. [ ]

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The party would need military support to challenge Assad successfully. The shadowy Baath Party military committee could be the vehicle for such support, but available information, albeit limited, suggests the committee functions primarily as a voice of the military in party conclaves rather than as a subordinate unit of the party. Moreover, Assad, who helped form the committee and used it to plot a military coup, almost certainly monitors the activities and contacts of its members. ☐

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### Resignation

Assad will not relinquish power voluntarily, and all indications are that he will persevere in his effort to crush domestic opposition. A unified Alawite consensus might force his resignation, but this would in effect be a coup by key Alawite military leaders. These leaders, fearful of a counter coup, probably would execute the Assad brothers rather than accept a presidential resignation. ☐

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### The Soviet Relationship with Syria

Since Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 and the subsequent Camp David meetings, the USSR and Syria have been drawn together by their shared opposition to the Camp David process. This has accelerated a movement toward closer relations that began in the mid-1970s. ☐

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Although the Soviets initially were concerned that Syria might join the US-sponsored Egyptian-Israeli negotiations, they have supported and encouraged Syria's subsequent role in leading Arab opposition to the accord. The importance of Syria to the Soviets has been further reinforced in recent months by widespread Muslim criticism of the invasion of Afghanistan and the resulting Soviet reliance on its remaining Arab friends. The Syrians, faced with mounting internal problems and continued tensions with Iraq, have wanted to emphasize close ties to the USSR and have dismissed Afghanistan as an unfortunate distraction from more important Middle East issues. The result has been at least a temporary dovetailing of Soviet and Syrian interests and a willingness to support each other. ☐

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In addition to promoting their broader regional interests, the Soviets seek close ties to Syria in order to insure their access to Syria's military facilities, access that has apparently been increasing in recent months, and to obtain hard currency earnings through the sale of arms. Moscow has found Syria an

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even more attractive arms client since oil-rich Arab states agreed to increase their subsidies for Syrian arms purchases following the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli treaty. We estimate there are now about 3,000 Soviet military and 1,000 civilians advisers in Syria. [ ]

### Soviet View of Syrian Instability

In view of their closer relationship with Damascus, the Soviets are clearly worried about the stability of Assad's regime and its prospects for survival. Although they have had their ups and downs with Assad over the years, the Soviets are pleased with the current relationship and would probably prefer to avoid either a change or prolonged instability. They have come to know Assad and probably find his innate caution to their liking, particularly on volatile Arab-Israeli issues. [ ]

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We have no good evidence of who the Soviets think may succeed Assad or whom they would prefer. Although familiar with leading figures in the government, Baath Party and military, they do not appear to have made a special effort to cultivate a particular individual. To do so would risk angering Assad and rupturing relations. [ ]

The Soviets probably fear that Assad's demise could, in the worst case, lead to the protracted instability that characterized Syrian politics in the 1960s and eventually lead to a strongly anti-Soviet regime based on the Muslim opposition. They are probably also concerned that a successor to Assad might undertake risky policies in the Golan heights or in Lebanon. [ ]

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Moscow has been particularly concerned by the campaign of terrorism within Syria directed against Soviet advisers. Since January 1980, at least 12 Soviet advisers have been assassinated, and the Soviets have been compelled to take precautions to protect themselves. The Soviets have pressed Syrian officials to adopt more effective security measures [ ]

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Until the nearly successful assassination attempt against him on 26 June, President Assad, wary of an increased Soviet role in this sensitive area, refused these petitions. It now appears that he has changed his mind and is willing to accept at least limited Soviet security assistance. Soviet security experts reportedly began arriving in Syria in early July; [REDACTED] 25X1

### The Possibility of a Friendship Treaty

Although they are concerned about instability in Syria, the Soviets probably hope that Assad's weak domestic position and Syria's increased political and military dependence on the USSR will create opportunities for Moscow to establish an even closer bilateral relationship. They have long pushed President Assad to sign a friendship treaty, the symbol to them of expanding influence. The Syrians, basically distrustful of Soviet intentions and eager to maintain their ability to maneuver, have refused. [REDACTED] 25X1

The Soviets probably still favor the signing of a friendship treaty with Syria, although they may recognize that entering into a formal relationship with the shaky regime could intensify opposition both to Assad and the Soviet presence. Nonetheless, they probably believe that the advantages to be gained outweigh the disadvantages. It would give their image and credibility in the Arab world a much needed boost, bolster their case for playing a leading role in Middle East negotiations, and possibly survive leadership changes in Syria, providing a basis for continued close bilateral relations. [REDACTED] 25X1

During the past two months, reports have suggested the imminent signing of a Soviet-Syrian treaty. Syrian spokesmen have referred to the need to construct a "qualitatively new relationship" with the USSR in order to alter the military and strategic balance in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Such statements are probably designed primarily to pressure anti-Soviet Arab moderates to give more support to Syria. [REDACTED] 25X1

The Syrian idea of what a Soviet-Syrian treaty would entail differs from the Soviet perception. The Syrians seem to be thinking in terms of a joint defense agreement that would afford Syria protection from Israel. The Soviets, however, have long refused to provide a blanket security commitment to Syria, fearing confrontation with Israel and the US, and they are unlikely to sign an agreement that commits them in advance to come to Syria's defense in the event of war. [REDACTED] 25X1

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[REDACTED]

Assad has not yet decided to sign a treaty with the USSR. Nonetheless, Syria may move closer to Moscow if it does not obtain stronger Arab financial and political backing or if moderate Arabs begin to support the autonomy talks. [REDACTED]

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Soviet Actions in the Event of a Significant Challenge to Assad

Moscow's ability to influence the political and security situation in Syria is limited. While the Soviets have diligently developed diplomatic, cultural, and military ties to Damascus, hoping to securely anchor their position, the Soviets have only been able to convert these ties to limited influence over Syrian policies or politics. [REDACTED]

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Further complicating Soviet efforts to support Assad is the realization on both sides that too close an embrace by the Soviets could intensify opposition to Assad's regime. This seems to be a factor contributing to the postponement of a friendship treaty and the exchange of leadership visits. [REDACTED]

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Moscow's most important tool for advancing its interests in Damascus is its arms supply relationship. The Soviets appear to have accelerated the pace of shipments of advanced weapons systems to Syria over the past year, apparently in part to enable Assad to retain support within the military. This in turn has necessitated an increase in the Soviet military presence, which may now exceed 3,000. But this relationship gives Moscow only limited influence with the regime on domestic matters, and none at all with the opposition. [REDACTED]

The Soviets apparently have urged Assad to broaden the base of his regime by easing restrictions on the Syrian Communist Party. There have been some indications that Assad is willing to cooperate more closely with the CPS; [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Despite these efforts, the Soviets probably recognize that the weak Communist Party is a marginal asset. [REDACTED]

Despite a strong desire to see Assad remain, it is very unlikely that the Soviets would use their military forces to prop up his regime. They have little reason to believe that the most likely successors to Assad would alter relations with the USSR significantly; although they are certainly worried by the prospect of radical Islamic elements coming to power, they probably do not see this as the probable short-term outcome. They may calculate that direct Soviet participation in support of Assad could antagonize a potential successor and fuel the anti-Soviet Muslim opposition. Moreover, they probably recognize that only a substantial force would be required to suppress a challenge to the regime by the Syrian military. Such a force could become involved in protracted factional fighting that might escalate into a wider conflagration, possibly involving Israel. [ ]

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Assad is unlikely to request Soviet military intervention to help in suppressing internal dissidence; to do so would be a possibly fatal admission of weakness. He might seek symbolic Soviet military support, such as additional high-level military visits or joint maneuvers, but his would be useful primarily as a warning to external powers not to try to take advantage of his domestic problems. The Soviets presumably would react cautiously and be reluctant to involve Soviet combat troops in Syria, even for maneuvers. [ ]

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Should Assad's position deteriorate significantly, the Soviets would almost certainly adjust their policies to insure the continuation of their influence and presence in Syria. If Assad seemed likely to fall, they might attempt to distance themselves from him and emphasize contacts with those elements likely to play a role in post-Assad Syria. If a successor emerged from the current ruling elite whom Moscow found unacceptable, they could threaten to curtail arms shipments in an attempt to spur the military to block his rise to power. [ ]

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On balance, the Soviets would probably try to make as graceful a shift as possible from Assad to his successor. They would probably hope that Syria's continued dependence on Moscow for political support and particularly military assistance would ensure a continued close relationship. [ ]

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